

Living in a Material World: Time and Money

In the introduction to 'Orthodoxy', G. K. Chesterton's account of his spiritual journey, he relates a story that he had always meant to write. Of an English yachtsman who set sail, miscalculated his route, and – after weeks on the ocean -- landed back in Britain under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas.

The intrepid explorer, armed to the teeth and speaking in sign language, plants the Union Jack on the barbaric shore that turns out to be ... the beach at Brighton. Is the man a fool? Of course he is. But he's a happy fool, according to Chesterton, because what could be more delightful than to have all the fascinating terrors of going abroad ... combined with all the security of coming home again? To have braced oneself to discover New South Wales and then realise – with a gush of happy tears – that it was really old South Wales?

In considering the subject of spiritual disciplines – virtually all of which were taught to me as a child by diligent Sunday School teachers and modelled by my Christian parents – I find resonance with Chesterton's brave seafarer.

Having rejected so many wise and prudent Christian practices – claiming heroically to be living under grace, not the law – and having set sail to explore the wonders of the Christian life unencumbered by fussy conventions I find myself pretty much back where I started. Embarrassed, yes, feeling a bit of a fool but a happy fool, arriving on a safe and familiar shore yet discovering it as a new land.

Spiritual disciplines, it seems to me, are all about acknowledging that the material world we inhabit every day is also a spiritual world. Like so much of our Christian faith, there is a paradox in the disciplines in that we employ very specific, very down-to-earth activities in order to enter more fully into the spiritual dimension. The spiritual and material are intertwined and, indeed, become one and the same. If you are giving up such earthly delights as chocolate or alcohol for Lent in hope of a spiritual effect you know what I'm talking about.

The two disciplines I will touch upon – stewardship and daily devotion -- are small but powerful reminders that I am living in a spiritual world.

Now, nothing is more material than money. Fundamentally, it is simply our society's method of exchange – the means to obtain the necessities of life. But it also serves as a measure of our success, as an indication of our value. It promises security for the future. It places us in a social class. It's a way of keeping score.

And so money has become a cipher for the non-spiritual life. Worldly treasures are the antithesis of spiritual ones. Money is tainted, it's dirty, it gets in the way of our spirituality. If only we could do without it!

I grew up in a family where tithing -- giving 10% of one's income – was not something to be striven for as a goal, but rather the starting point in expressing the concept of stewardship, sort of like brushing one's teeth or eating a balanced meal. You just did it ... because it was the right thing to do.

So, at the age of 5, when I was awarded a nickel (or 5-cent) weekly allowance, it was given to me in pennies so that I could put a penny into the Sunday School collection each week. I just did it. And lest you think I was some childhood saint, it definitely was not lost on me that when my allowance was upped to 10 cents per week I would still only have to give a penny, with the five cent rise mine to keep in its entirety.

We didn't have h'pennies in Kansas.

Tithing was not taught to me as something that is primarily done out of compassion for the poor, out of loyalty or feelings of responsibility to the local church, or out of guilt for being a 'have' in a world of 'have nots'. Nor was it taught to me as something that would bring a reward – invest 10% in the Bank of God, and get a guaranteed return your deposit.

Rather, tithing was – correctly, I believe – taught as a discipline borne out of the belief that ALL I am today or will ever be, all I possess or will ever possess, everything I might be even remotely tempted to call 'mine' – belongs absolutely to the Creator God who entrusted it to me in the first place.

As this morning's psalm declared: 'The earth is the Lord's, and all that fills it.' That includes me ... and all my 'stuff'.

Giving like this is miles away from the sort of giving we are most often encouraged to do. It does not require a pull on our heart strings, it does not pique feelings of guilt or shame. It doesn't marry giving to entertainment or the chance to jump out of an airplane. It doesn't appeal to vanity. It does not even require a 'worthy cause' or 'deserving poor' to operate.

These things have their place in the generous Christian's life, and deserve our consideration, because the needs of the world are great, but they're not what I would call disciplined giving.

Steve and I have found that giving a percentage -- and taking that percentage 'off the top' of all income, whether we feel like it or not -- is a profound way of acknowledging to God, ourselves, and the world that we are His. And because spiritual discipline is not a goal in itself, but rather conditioning for the spiritual life, everything we give to others becomes a gift to Christ himself and draws us more deeply into a relationship with Him and with those he loves.

Similarly, in spending the first minutes of each day in His presence, I acknowledge that, like my financial resources, my time and energy have been given to me by God.

Here, I really am like the explorer who lands at Brighton. All my life I had been told that the morning quiet time with God was the most important time of the day. People I admired and trusted said they wouldn't dream of starting the day without their 'appointment with God'. Perhaps after the service someone will tell me who said words to the effect: 'I pray an hour a day, but sometimes I'm very busy. On those days I pray two hours.' I never bought that. Who had time? Saints, maybe. It never fit into my schedule. And it struck me as legalistic.

About ten years ago, I decided -- for some reason that I cannot remember now -- that I needed to read the Bible through. I knew it could be done in a year with just a little determination, at 15 minutes a day. I embarked on the project one New Year's Day, with starts and stops. There were times when I had to read several days' ration of scripture to make up for the days I'd missed. However, I did manage to read the Bible through in the year.

But it all went by so fast! And I didn't begin to get to grips with the drama that had unfolded, a few chapters at a time. So the next year I got out a different translation and started in again. I think it was in the second year that I realised that I was less likely to get behind if I did the reading first thing in the morning, before everyone was up and about in the house, before going to work.

In this way, the morning habit began to be established. I soon found that, in the quietness, reading scripture led me into an attitude of prayer. Especially as I read the Psalms, those words would become my own words, things that I, too, could say to God. And reading the words of Jesus prompted me to respond to Him, to speak back to Him on the basis of what He had said to me.

After all that time at sea, as it were, here I was: getting up early and having my daily quiet time, first thing in the morning. And although I'm willing to call it a discipline, it is certainly one of the happiest disciplines I've ever practiced – involving as it does a comfortable chair, a view of the garden, a gentle beam of light on the page, and the morning's first cup of coffee. I look forward to this as I go to sleep, and it propels me out of bed in the morning. On the occasions when I'm robbed of it by circumstances I feel the loss, just as I might feel disappointment if a lunch date with a close friend was cancelled.

I've used the early morning hours to read through the Bible several more times, and to read devotional books as well. Anything that orients me towards God works for me. It's been a time to reflect, to pray, to commit myself and the day ahead to the Lord.

In prayer, it has been important to dedicate the first minutes of the day to God Just as in giving it has been important to give 'off the top' and not from what is left over. Because days are short, and the end of the month comes all too soon. What we don't prioritise often doesn't get done.

At the end of his life, King David gave vast amounts of his accumulated wealth to his son, Solomon, to be used for the building of the Lord's temple in Jerusalem. Others followed suit, happily and with abandon, and a massive amount of gold, silver, precious stones, marble, and other building material was collected. In I Chronicles we read that the people rejoiced at what was given to the Lord.

David's prayer, perhaps the last of his songs to be recorded in scripture, acknowledged God's greatness and the privilege of stewardship and has found its way into the liturgy of the Christian church. Asking the question: 'Who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this?' David states the fundamental truth that is lived out when we acknowledge our responsibilities before God, as he answers his own question:

'Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.'

Amen.